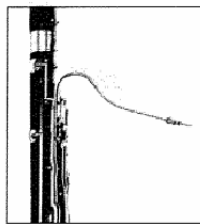


» words Alex Davidson

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# STARTING ON THE BASSOON



INSTRUMENTAL/VOCAL

## When can you start the bassoon?

For many years it wasn't really possible to start the instrument until the age of around 11 because of its size and weight. The arrival of the mini bassoon (or tenoroon) around 15 years ago changed this. These scaled-down versions are higher in pitch and lighter to hold, so are suitable for children from the age of around seven. They aren't perfect (tuning can be particularly unstable), but they are great for getting to grips with the basic fingerings and technique of blowing, and you can take exams up to Grade 3 on them. Children can then move on to a full-sized instrument when the time is right, perhaps starting with a short-reach instrument (the same size as a full-size one but modified for small hands). Many players also transfer to the bassoon in their teens from another woodwind instrument.

## How do you know if a child is suited to the bassoon?

Contrary to popular opinion, you don't have to be particularly big to play it. I'm only 5'3" and have managed just fine! As long as you can cope with the weight and reach the keys, you'll be OK. Bassoons are expensive, have lots of keys that can

bend easily and use fragile reeds, so they are best for a child who is careful rather than clumsy. They will need to be quite independent and not afraid of being a bit different, as it's likely that they will be part of a very small minority. The instrument is also best suited to a child who is patient and can cope with mainly playing a supporting role in ensemble work. Although there are some great bassoon solos out there, it has to be said that bassoonists do spend rather a lot of time playing the bass line, especially in school bands.

## I know they are expensive but how much are we talking about?

Brace yourself. A decent new student bassoon will cost you £4,000 or £5,000, and a mini bassoon up to £2,500. However, there are options. Howarth of London runs a rental scheme for mini bassoons and full-sized instruments starting at £40 a month. This is useful for trying before buying. There is also a strong secondhand market, where you can find a good student instrument for around £2,500 to £4,000. Well-regarded makers of student bassoons include Adler, Fox/Renard and Schreiber, and good places to look for secondhand instruments are Howarth, [doublereed.co.uk](http://doublereed.co.uk) and the Fox UK website.

See also the special offer from Wood, Wind & Reed just below this article! The good news here is that as long as they are well looked after, bassoons don't tend to lose much value.

Some schools and music services also have bassoons available to hire at lower rates, although they can be in a dire state if they have been living in a cupboard for a while. In all cases, do get the instrument checked over before buying.

## What about reeds?

Some teachers can supply reeds, but most local music shops won't stock them. You are best off ordering online from a specialist supplier such as Howarth or Britannia reeds. If you're nearby, these shops will often let you go in and try some out to find which ones you like. There are many different sorts, so ask a teacher for help. A student reed costs around £8-10, but they should last a while if looked after.

## Is it worth all the effort?

Well, I may be biased but the bassoon is a great instrument. It is capable of wonderful humour (Ivor the Engine/Sorcerer's Apprentice) as well as beautiful lyrical sounds (the second movement of Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony or Elgar's Romance for bassoon and orchestra). Being a less common instrument, schools and local ensembles are often falling over themselves to get good players in, so you'll have lots of opportunities to play. For example, I was playing first bassoon in my county youth orchestra at the age of 14 while many of my (technically better) flute-playing friends had to wait until 16 or 17 to even get in. And if you're being totally mercenary about it, playing the bassoon is an interesting thing to write on your UCAS form!

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